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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the problems faced in working with competing theories of basic writing and suggests its own kind of theoretical analysis of nonstandard writing. A brief overview of basic writing theories is presented, and the theories are categorized into two approaches: a traditional approach of teaching by prescription in an authoritarian classroom atmosphere using William Strunk and E. B. White's "The Elements of Style," and a nontraditional approach of teaching by practice with emphasis on the personal and the teacher as friend. The basic writing theory recommended in the paper suggests that students who use nonstandard English learn that the development in standard English of conventions of scholarly discourse was designed to legitimize knowledge, that access to these conventions has been limited by society and has kept nonstandard users powerless, and that mastery of these conventions is a political act. (AEA)

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Problems in Choosing a Theory of Basic Writing: Toward a Rhetoric of Scholarly Discourse

A theory of Basic Writing should help us to make sense of what goes on in the classroom. With a theory in mind, we suddenly find it easier to see patterns in our students' writing problems, to do coherent long-range curriculum planning, and to establish criteria for evaluating the students' progress. In other words, a theory provides us with a consistent interpretation of our experience that imposes an understandable order on our experience and thus increases our control over our experience. When the same theory governing an area of experience is accepted by everyone, we tend to forget that we are operating under a theory because no theoretical disagreements arise to remind us of it. Disagreements tend rather to be methodological, as for example, what essay assignment will best stimulate the kind of writing we all agree that we want? When everyone agrees on a theory, we tend to assume that the theory simply describes reality, leaving us the task of applying it most productively.

But sometimes, we discover that nothing we try is productive. Then we remember that we are operating under a theory, and we begin to suspect that the theory is inadequate. We remember that a theory is a man-made interpretation of experience, not something like a photograph of the underlying structure of reality. If theories are man-made, and if our old theory

seems inadequate, then we can make a new theory that will deal better with our current experience. But how do we decide which new theory to follow? This is the question now facing knowledgeable Basic Writing teachers. I would like to discuss some of the problems we face in choosing among competing theories of Basic Writing, and to suggest the kind of theoretical analysis I believe to be most productive.

First, here is a brief overview of Basic Writing theory. Basic Writing theory begins with the presence in college of students using various Non-standard dialects of English; they've been there since the turn of the century, at least. With the so-called traditional student, the English teacher's problem has been, more or less, "How do I get him to write better?" With the so-called non-traditional student, however, the English teacher is suddenly forced to ask, "How can I get him to write at all? Does he have to learn Standard English? How can he do that at age 18?"

The presence in college of so-called non-traditonal students created a situation in which old theories of language and learning suddenly seemed inadequate. Two new schools of thought developed to deal with this situation, and the competition between them is still going on. One of these theoretical lines developed from the work of Jespersen, Sapir, Whorf, and Basil Bernstein. The basic premise here is that language determines thought; we do not dress our thoughts in words, but rather, we can only have thoughts for which there already exists the linguistic potential for expression in the form of our native language. If language determines thought, then whatever cognitive abilities we can claim to possess must be embodied in the form of our language.

Following this theoretical line, Chomsky and the structural linguists have attempted to analyze the essential elements that embody human thought processes in language, and psycholinguists have attempted to verify their systems experimentally. For those who want to apply this research to the teaching of writing, it has been tempting to conclude that if language determines thought, then we ought to teach the form of language that best embodies human thought processes. And if language embodies human thought processes, then we ought to be able to discover the best form of language through psychological experimentation. Recently, Claus Mueller has used the work of Bernstein, and E. D. Hirsch has used the work of Jespersen, to justify the same conclusion: that the upper middle class form of English is indeed the form that best embodies, in its very linguistic structure, the basic human thought processes. E. D. Hirsch, Janet Emig, and others are currently carrying on more psychological research into the relation between the structure of English and human thought processes.

This theoretical line has attracted adherents partly because it bases itself on a rigorously scientific methodology. It promises to provide unimpeachable proof of the cognitive superiority of some form of language, and preliminary reports seem to suggest that Standard English enjoys this sort of superiority. This, too, has drawn adherents to this theoretical line. If Standard English is the form of English that best embodies human thought processes, then the Basic Writing teacher can teach its rules to the non-traditional students with the clear hope of opening to them a whole new world of conceptual sophistication previously denied them by their Nonstandard

dialects. Moreover, this theoretical line promises to discover in human psychology the perfect method for getting students to learn Standard English. If more funding is forthcoming, and it probably will be, this theoretical line promises finally to solve the educational problem posed by the non-traditional student--within the next ten years, so E. D. Hirsch predicts.

The second line of theory that has developed in response to the needs of the non-traditional student has always been in something of an adversary position to the first theoretical line, ever since Jane Addams argued for her students' right to their own language and culture in 1897. This second theoretical line argues that valuable knowledge will be lost if students are forced to discard their Nonstandard writing and thinking habits when they enter school. The supposed cognitive superiority of Standard English has been challenged by studies such as those of William Labov and Mina Shaughnessy, which demonstrate that Nonstandard dialects possess their own internal linguistic consistency and conceptual power. Basil Bernstein, too, has spoken for this theoretical line, in an attempt to correct the uses to which his work has been put.

This theoretical line generally denies that Nonstandard dialects are linguistically deficient, and argues that therefore, so-called remediation is unnecessary. Some adherents of this line argue that we should establish pluralistic standards of correct language, so that students can do their schoolwork in their own dialects. Other adherents argue that students should master Standard English, but only so they can translate their ideas into the most widely understood and accepted form of the language. Most adherents of this second theoretical line agree that the first theoretical line's

method of teaching Standard English amounts to a project in cultural assimilation from which they want to protect their students. One way to protect them is to teach the development of writing according to personal standards, as in the pedagogy of Ken Macrorie and Peter Elbow. This second theoretical line, however, has generally been fighting an uphill battle against the entrenched dominance of Standard English and also against entrenched methods of teaching it, many of which the first theoretical line has been able to rehabilitate.

Now, how can we choose between these two competing theoretical lines? Perhaps we might ask for a closer examination of the data. Both theoretical lines are working with the same mass of data, that is, the writing our students produce; but they interpret this writing very differently, thus leading to very different pedagogical approaches and political implications. We remember that a theory is a man-made interpretation of experience, but still, doesn't it begin with experience? There might be a correct way to interpret this experience, our interaction with non-traditional students, if only we could find it.

Suppose we assume that there is a correct way to interpret student writing so as to establish a theory of Basic Writing. Presumably, this correct method of interpretation would somehow inhere in the data itself, that is, in the structure of writing, independent of and prior to theoretical explanation. But how can we know when we have found the correct method? If we want to be rigorously scientific, we would have to produce evidence that it is the correct method. But evidence as such does not exist; there is only data, or experience. We can select some portion of experience or data and organize it into evidence only with the help of some theory. Evidence is

data that means something, and only a theory can make it mean something.

In other words, there is a vicious circle here. Any method of interpretation that claims to be correct will have to base its claims to correctness on evidence. But evidence can be interpreted only in light of the theory which the method of interpretation is supposed to validate. We would have to accept the theory in advance before we could judge the evidence claiming to prove that the theory's method of interpretation is correct. No experimental data can produce of itself a theory that is above debate. Theories are man-made, and are open to debate whenever anyone cares to take issue with them. It seems that we cannot rely on simple inspection of data to decide which theory of Basic Writing we should follow.

Suppose, then, that we analyze the pedagogical methods and political implications of the competing theoretical lines. Both lines consider themselves to be humane, but perhaps we can discover which one really is. The first theoretical line is relatively traditional in its pedagogical approach. For example, E. D. Hirsch recommends The Elements of Style, by Strunk and White, of which the first edition appeared in 1935, as an ideal modern composition textbook. But by "traditional," I really mean that the first line prefers teaching by prescription or maxim, although the material prescribed may range from the Harbrace Handbook's grammar rules to the wave-particle-field heuristic of Young, Becker, and Pike. The common assumption is that the teacher can simply describe the elements of ideal expository prose to the students, and they will reproduce it, with perhaps a little prodding from the red pen.

This assumption is based on the assumption that the language being taught does embody basic human thought processes, which the students will eventually

discover within themselves. And this assumption confers absolute authority on the teacher's judgment, even to the point of knowing what the student wants to say better than he or she does, according to Hirsch. The teacher exercises this authority in the good cause of opening to students a world of conceptual sophistication denied them by their Nonstandard dialects--but then there is no "good cause" if the Nonstandard dialects aren't really inferior. Even leaving aside this question, though, we see that the first theoretical line encourages an authoritarian classroom atmosphere in which the students who catch on will succeed, and those who don't, won't. In other words, this theoretical line, from the best of intentions, seems nevertheless to perpetuate a situation in which education is an elite preserve and those who can't or won't write Standard English are seen as somehow deficient in basic human thought processes. Thus, not only is the current political-economic structure of society not challenged by this theoretical line, it is indirectly supported by it, to the disadvantage of non-traditional students.

The second theoretical line is relatively untraditional in its pedagogical approach, often as a direct attempt to counteract the authoritarian implications of the first theoretical line. The second theoretical line downplays the teacher's authority over the judgment of so-called errors in writing, for fear of discouraging students who persist in the forms of their Nonstandard dialects. The second theoretical line generally recommends giving students a lot of writing practice, much of it only minimally directed by the teacher, and often evaluated only by the other students. This line emphasizes the personal in writing--writing from personal experience, reading material that is personally relevent, developing personal standards of style.

When the mastery of Standard English is taken as a goal, it is usually pursued through writing lab activities and through editing; typically, little class time is given to prescriptive lessons.

The common assumption here, oddly enough, is that language does embody basic human thought processes, which the students will eventually discover within themselves. They can only make this discovery through personal exploration, however, so this assumption in this context changes the teacher's role from absolute authority on language to something like older friend. The teacher advises rather than directs the students. The teacher, however, usually has considerably more knowledge of language than the students do, so the advising role can become simply a more invidious version of red pen wielding, more difficult for the student to notice and counteract because the teacher is acting friendly and the student is exposing intimate personal details in every paper, or should be doing so. And still, students may simply produce the kind of writing they think the teacher wants. The problem here is that this second theoretical line, from the best of intentions, seems nevertheless to perpetuate a situation in which education is an elite preserve and those who catch on will succeed, while those who don't, won't. What's worse is that those who catch on to the pedagogical method of this second theoretical line will only succeed temporarily. They will not know what to do as soon as they are asked to perform serious intellectual work in other courses. As with the first theoretical line, here too, the student has to take the main responsibility for his academic success or failure; but if the first theoretical line suggests a politically suspect boot-strap theory of social mobility, here the boot straps seem to have been cut off short.

Although, as I have suggested, these two theoretical lines have opposed themselves to one another for a long time, I think it is hard to choose between them because they have too many points of similarity. Both base their pedagogy upon the assumption that there are basic or universal human thought processes which somehow inhere in the structure of language itself. Both treat the non-traditional student as a problem for which a solution must be found--that is, they tend to patronize these students. And both theoretical lines place the main responsibility for academic success or failure on the individual student. In short, both lines are linguistically and politically naive.

In developing my own line of theoretical analysis, I would like to return briefly to the work of Jespersen, Sapir, Whorf, and Bernstein. These men developed their theories of language through comparative studies of the forms of language used in different historical periods, different cultures, or sub-cultures. In other words, their initial insight was that different social groups use different forms of language, which reflect each group's perspective on the world. In my opinion, however, these theorists then got sidetracked, or their followers did, either in attempting to determine what underlying elements all languages have in common, which would be basic human thought processes, or in attempting to determine what form of language best embodies human thought processes. Basic Writing theorists have persisted in pursuing these attempts in psychological research.

I have tried to argue that we cannot look to such research for an undebateable theory of Basic Writing, because of the difficulty in interpreting experimental data. But I have tried to argue further that there is no such thing as an undebateable theory, because all theories are man-made and are

subject to adjustment or overthrow as our situation changes. Thus, if we decide that conclusions drawn from data are suspect, we really lose nothing in the way of so-called certainty. Rather, we simply recognize the position we are always in with respect to our theories: that is, we try to formulate a theory that will be most productive in our current situation. To formulate such a theory, I would like to return to the initial insight of seminal language theorists: the different languages of different social groups reflect their different perspectives on the world.

I contend that Nonstandard dialects of English do indeed reflect coherent perspectives on the world--but these perspectives are limited. There is no question here, however, of linguistic inadequacy or deficiency in basic human thought processes. Nonstandard dialects are limited by the larger social structure in which their users live. The users of Nonstandard dialects come from social groups that have been kept powerless in our society, and their dialects reflect and therefore perpetuate this powerlessness. Typically, the users of Nonstandard dialects are prevented from formulating insights into the social structure that keeps them powerless. They may indeed be able to analyze and generalize, but they cannot perform these conceptual operations in such a way as to formulate insights that can have an affect on the social structure. When they enter school, they enter a situation in which their own knowledge does not count, and whether they are drilled in Standard English or allowed to retain their own dialects, they still never learn what kind of knowledge does count.

Knowledge that counts as knowledge--that is, knowledge that can have an affect on the social structure--is knowledge formulated according to the

conventions of Standard English in scholarly discourse. Therefore, students must master Standard English. But learning Standard English is not merely a matter of reproducing linguistic patterns that automatically encourage critical thinking because their deep structure embodies human thought processes. And on the other hand, learning Standard English is not merely a matter of translating thoughts into an acceptable medium, leaving the thoughts unchanged. Rather, learning Standard English is an initiation into the complex conventions of scholarly discourse whereby knowledge is brought to bear on society.

Colleges exist in our society to foster the scholarly disciplines. A scholarly discipline shapes some aspect of experience into what we call a subject for study, and prescribes methods for investigating the subject. Because the scholarly disciplines are authorized and institutionalized by society, the only knowledge that counts as knowledge is knowledge generated by the scholarly disciplines. The scholarly disciplines generate and promulgate knowledge through the conventions of scholarly discourse. These conventions govern: how we define a subject for study; how we define a problem; what counts as logical reasoning; what counts as adequate evidence; what counts as a credible persona in scholarly discourse; and so on. Any investigation of experience that does not follow these conventions is treated by society as illogical, ill-supported, and not worth listening to.

Therefore, I contend that in teaching Standard English to Basic Writing students, we must teach them the purpose of Standard English--that is, the development in Standard English of conventions of scholarly discourse designed to legitimize knowledge. We must explain that access to these

conventions has been limited by society, not necessarily deliberately, as a reflection of the powerful group's control over the powerless. But learning Standard English should not be seen as a means of social mobility, transforming some members of powerless groups into members of the elite. Rather, through mastery of the Standard English conventions of scholarly discourse, members of powerless groups seek to generate knowledge that counts as knowledge, or knowledge that can transform the social structure that has kept them powerless. Basic Writing teachers and students should see that mastery of the Standard English conventions of scholarly discourse is a political act. In the Basic Writing classroom, students' experience is neither expunged nor translated, but rather transformed into knowledge that can affect society. Thus, the Basic Writing student sees his or her learning task as one that grows out of the political situation of our society and develops to affect that situation, rather than seeing it in terms of individual deficiency and success.

I suggest, therefore, that Basic Writing theorists turn their attention to the elucidation of the Standard English conventions of scholarly discourse. A rhetoric of these conventions is precisely what our students need to learn. At the same time, we must keep in mind that insofar as we are empowering the powerless, the teaching of Basic Writing is a political act. Therefore, we cannot pretend to theorize in a political vacuum. In developing our theories, we must constantly return not only to the classroom situation, but to the political situation in the society at large. We must be aware that if the scholarly disciplines exist to legitimize knowledge, then any attempt to open the disciplines to social groups previously denied possession of

legitimate knowledge will meet with political resistance. We should recognize vocationalism and persistent attacks on the respectability of the teaching profession as instances of this political resistance. Finally, we should keep clear in our own minds that knowledge legitimized by the scholarly disciplines is not thereby falsified. Rather, it is our society's best effort to transform experience, through critical thinking, into constructive action. As Basic Writing teachers, our goal should be to empower our students for the intellectual work necessary to constructive action in our society, here and now.

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